

DATA COMMUNICATION APPARATUS AND DATA COMMUNICATION METHOD

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

5 1. Field of the Invention

The present invention relates to an information sharing technique to be used for sharing information among personal computers (referred to hereinafter as PCs), for example, which are connected over a network such as LAN or
10 WAN. More particularly, the present invention relates to the information sharing technique that uses no server for centrally controlling files to be shared nor server for centrally controlling indexes.

2. Description of the Related Art

15 Fig. 14 shows the configuration of a system according to a first conventional example in which a file sever for providing file sharing services to PCs connected over a network.

Fig. 15 shows the configuration of a system
20 according to a second conventional example in which two or more Web servers holding accessible files are connected over a network. The Web servers have hyper-links established therebetween to allow information to be shared among the users.

25 The operations of the conventional arts are now

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discussed.

According to the first conventional example, a network file control section on a PC issues a mount request to a network file service section on a file server based on a request from the user (a). Upon reception of the mount request, the network file service section grants a permission to the request, and then transmits various types of information to the network file control section, so that a disk holding shared files is treated as if the disk is the local disk of the PC (b). Consequently, the user is allowed to access the shared files in the same manner as to access the local disk.

According to the second conventional example, a browser on a PC issues an access request to a Web service section on a Web server based on a request from the user (a). The Web service section reads out a file for the access request from a disk (b), and then sends the file back to the browser (c). Then, the browser stores the file in a disk connected with the PC of the self (d), when required.

Problems posed by the conventional arts and to be solved by the present invention are discussed below.

According to first conventional example, there is a need of installing a file server to be used for providing a file sharing service to unspecified multiple users prior

to an operation. Besides, there is a need of providing a setting for access right control separately on the individual PCs of the users for security.

According to the second conventional example, there is a need also of installing a Web server to be used for providing a file sharing service to unspecified multiple users prior to operation. Besides, there is a need of the user transferring a shared file generated by the user to a disk holding shared files on the Web server.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The present invention is directed to solving the problems identified above.

These and other objects of the embodiments of the present invention are accomplished by the present invention as hereinafter described in further detail.

According to one aspect of the present invention, a data communication apparatus connected to at least more than one of data holding apparatuses, the data communication apparatus being allowed to use at least a part of data held by the data holding apparatuses as shared data, the data communication apparatus includes,

a search request generating and transmitting section for generating a search request which requests a data holding apparatus to search shared data corresponding to a given search condition from the shared data held by the data holding apparatus, and for transmitting the search request generated to the data holding apparatus,

a search result receiving section for receiving a search result for the search request from the data holding apparatus,

a data transmission request generating and transmitting section for generating a data transmission request which requests to transmit shared data searched based on the search result received by the search result receiving section, and for transmitting the data transmission request generated to the data holding apparatus, and

a data receiving section for receiving shared data requested to be transmitted by the data transmission request from the data holding apparatus to which the data transmission request is transmitted by the data transmission request generating and transmitting section.

According to another aspect of the present invention, a data communication apparatus, connected with at least more than one of data holding apparatuses, sharing with the data holding apparatuses at least a part of data which

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the data communication apparatus holds as shared data, the data communication apparatus includes,

a shared data storing section for storing data which the data communication apparatus holds as the shared data,

5 a search executing section for receiving a search request from a specific data holding apparatus, the search request requesting to search shared data corresponding to a given search condition from the shared data stored in the shared data storing section, for sharing the shared
10 data corresponding to the search condition based on the search request received, and for transmitting a search result to the specific data holding apparatus,

a data transmission request receiving section for receiving from the specific data holding apparatus a data
15 transmission request which requests to transmit shared data searched by the search executing section, and

a data transmitting section for transmitting shared data requested to be transmitted to the specific data holding apparatus based on the data transmission request
20 received by the data transmission request receiving section.

According to still another aspect of the present invention, a data communication method for communicating with at least more than one of data holding apparatuses
25 and for using at least a part of data held by the data

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holding apparatuses as shared data, the data communication method includes,

generating a search request which requests a data holding apparatus to search shared data corresponding to a given search condition from the shared data held by the data holding apparatus,

transmitting the search request generated to the data holding apparatus,

receiving search result for the search request from the data holding apparatus,

generating a data transmission request which requests to transmit shared data searched based on the search result received in the receiving the search result,

transmitting the data transmission request generated to the data holding apparatus, and

receiving shared data requested to be transmitted by the data transmission request from the data holding apparatus to which the data transmission request is transmitted in the transmitting the data transmission request.

According to still another aspect of the present invention, a data communication method for communicating with at least more than one of data holding apparatuses and for sharing with the data holding apparatuses at least a part of data which the data communication method holds

as shared data, the data communication method includes,
storing data which the data communication method
holds as the shared data,

receiving a search request from a specific data
5 holding apparatus, the search request requesting to search
shared data corresponding to a given search condition from
the shared data stored in the storing,

searching the shared data corresponding to the
search condition based on the search request received,
10 transmitting a search result to the specific data
holding apparatus,

receiving a data transmission request which requests
to transmit shared data searched in the searching, from
the specific data holding apparatus, and

15 transmitting shared data requested to be transmitted
to the specific data holding apparatus based on the data
transmission request received in the receiving the data
transmission request.

20 Further scope of applicability of the present
invention will become apparent from the detailed
description given hereinafter. However, it should be
understood that the detailed description and specific
examples, while indicating preferred embodiments of the
25 invention, are given by way of illustration only, since

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various changes and modifications within the spirit and scope of the invention will become apparent to those skilled in the art from this detailed description.

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BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

10 The present invention will become more fully understood from the detailed description given hereinafter and the accompanying drawings which are given by way of illustration only, and thus are not limitative of the present invention, and wherein:

Fig. 1 is a block diagram showing a system configuration according to a first embodiment of the present invention;

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Fig. 2 is a block diagram showing a system configuration according to a second embodiment of the present invention;

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Fig. 3 is a flow chart illustrating the procedures of making an inquiry and receiving a search result according to a third embodiment of the present invention;

Fig. 4 is a block diagram showing a system configuration according to a fourth embodiment of the present invention;

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Fig. 5 is a flow chart illustrating the procedures of generating an index according to a fifth embodiment of

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the present invention;

Fig. 6 is a flow chart illustrating the procedures of making an inquiry and receiving a search result according to a sixth embodiment of the present invention;

5 Fig. 7 is a block diagram showing a system configuration according to a seventh embodiment of the present invention;

10 Fig. 8 is a flow chart illustrating the procedures of making an inquiry according to an eighth embodiment of the present invention;

Fig. 9 is a flow chart illustrating the procedures of permitting the entrance of a new member PC according to a ninth embodiment of the present invention;

15 Fig. 10 is a block diagram of a system configuration according to a tenth embodiment of the present invention;

Fig. 11 is a block diagram showing a system configuration according to an eleventh embodiment of the present invention;

20 Fig. 12 is a block diagram showing a system configuration according to a twelfth embodiment of the present invention;

Fig. 13 is a block diagram showing a system configuration according to a thirteenth embodiment of the present invention;

25 Fig. 14 shows the configuration of a data

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communication system according to a first conventional example; and

Fig. 15 shows the configuration of a data communication system according to a second conventional example.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

Reference will now be made in detail to the present preferred embodiments of the invention, examples of which are illustrated in the accompanying drawings, wherein like reference numerals indicate like elements through out the several views.

Embodiment 1.

Fig. 1 is a block diagram illustrating a system configuration including a data communication apparatus and a data holding apparatus according to a first embodiment of the present invention.

Referring to Fig. 1, a reference numeral 1 denotes a network such as LAN or WAN. A reference numeral 2 denotes a PC connected over the network 1. The PC 2 serves as either a data communication apparatus or a data holding apparatus. A reference numeral 3 denotes a disk which is connected with the PC 2 and serves as a shared data

The elements of the PC 2 are now elaborated. It is to be noted that all the PCs 2 connected over the network have their elements in common.

10 A reference 6 denotes an inquiry executing section
which generates an inquiry request (search request) to be
sent to another PC 2 based on a request from the user, and
transmits the inquiry request generated. The inquiry
executing section 6 functions as a search request
15 generating and transmitting section.

20 A reference numeral 8 denotes a search result
receiving section which receives a search result from the
search executing section 7 on another PC 2.

A reference numeral 9 denotes a file transmission
requesting section which requests the transmission of a
25 file specified by the user among files in the search

result received by the search result receiving section 8. The file transmission requesting section functions as a data transmission request generating and transmitting section.

5 A reference numeral 10 denotes a file transmitting section which transmits a requested file in response to the file transmission request transmitted by the file transmission requesting section 9 on another PC. The file transmitting section functions as a data transmitting
10 section.

 A reference numeral 11 denotes a file receiving section which receives a file transmitted by the file transmitting section 10 on another PC, and stores the file in a disk. The file receiving section functions as a data
15 receiving section.

 In addition to those, the PC 2 is further provided with a file transmission request receiving section (data transmission request receiving section), which is not shown in Fig. 1, for receiving the file transmission
20 request transmitted by the file transmission requesting section.

 An operation of the data communication apparatus of this embodiment is now discussed with reference to Fig. 1, in the case that one of the PCs 2, PC#1, requests the
25 other PCs 2, PC#2 to PC#n, to search a shared file and

transmit the shared file.

Initially, prior to an operation, the index generating section 5, on each PC 2, PC#1 to PC#n, reads out the shared files 30 of the self PC (a), generates an index and stores the index in the index file 4 (b).

Then, the inquiry executing section 6 on PC#1 generates an inquiry request (search request) to be sent respectively to the other PCs #2 to #n based on a keyword entered into PC#1 by the user of PC#1. The inquiry executing section 6 then broadcasts the inquiry request generated to the other PCs #2 to #n (c).

On the other PCs #2 to #n, the search executing section 7 receives the inquiry request from PC#1. The search executing section 7 searches the index file 4 on the self PC (d) based on the keyword included in the inquiry request received and then sends a search result back to PC#1 (e).

On PC#1, the search result receiving section 8 receives a search result from the search executing section 7 on each of the other PCs #2 to #n. The search result receiving section 8 provides the user with the search result received.

Then, the file transmission requesting section 9 on PC#1 generates the file transmission request for the file specified by the user. The file transmission requesting

section 9 then transmits the file transmission request generated to more than one of the other PCs #2 -#n (f). Referring to the figure, the file transmission request is transmitted to PC#2.

5 Then, the file transmission request receiving section (not shown in the figure) on PC#2 receives the file transmission request from PC#1. Then, the file transmitting section 10 on PC#2 reads out from the disk 3 a file corresponding to the file transmission request received by the file transmission request receiving section (g), and transmits the readout file to PC#1 (h).

10 The file receiving section 11 on PC#1 receives the file transmitted by the file transmitting section 10 on PC#2 and stores the file received in the disk 3 for the self PC (i).

15 It is a positive effect of the data communication apparatus of this embodiment that information is allowed to be shared with other unspecified multiple PCs without having any file servers by controlling the index of itself independently and providing information to other PCs in response to the requests by other PCs.

Embodiment 2.

25 According to the data communication apparatus discussed above in the first embodiment, an inquiry is

made to an unspecified number of other PCs by broadcasting. A second embodiment of the present invention introduces a data communication apparatus in which information is shared by a specified number of other PCs.

5 Fig. 2 shows a system configuration of the second embodiment.

Referring to the figure, reference numeral 1 to 11 and 30 denote the same elements as those having the same reference numerals discussed in the first embodiment. A
10 reference numeral 12 denotes a connected PC list (search request transmitting destination information) including information about PCs which information is to be shared with.

For that reason, the disk 3 also functions as a
15 search request transmitting destination information storing section in which the connected PC list (search request transmitting destination information) is stored according to this embodiment.

An operation of the data communication apparatus of
20 this embodiment is now discussed.

Firstly, the basic operation of the data
communication apparatus of this embodiment is the same as
that of the data communication apparatus of the first
embodiment, and therefore, descriptions will be made by
25 focusing only on operations which differ from those of the

Prior to making an inquiry to the other PCs #2 to #n based upon a keyword entered by the user, the inquiry executing section 6 on PC#1 reads out the connected PC list 12 held by PC#1 of the self (a), and then multicasts an inquiry request only to the other PCs listed in the connected PC list 12 (b).

It is a positive effect of the data communication apparatus of this embodiment that the number of PCs with which to share information may be limited, thereby allowing the amount of communication for inquiry to be controlled, by providing the connected PC list prior to operation, especially in case of a sudden explosive increase occurs in an amount of communication for inquiry in a wide area network (internet) or an in-house network (intranet) over which a vast number of PCs are connected.

25 According to the data communication apparatus

discussed above in the second embodiment, a PC receives all the search results obtained from the other PCs listed in the connected PC list in response to the search request (inquiry request). A third embodiment of the present invention introduces a data communication apparatus in which upon reception of a specified number of search results, a PC terminates a series of operations for making an inquiry for search and receiving a search result.

Fig. 3 is a flow chart illustrating such operations as mentioned above.

Referring to the figure, reference numerals denote the same elements as those having the same reference numerals discussed in the second embodiment.

An operation of the data communication apparatus of the third embodiment is now discussed. The basic operation of the data communication apparatus of this embodiment is same as that of the data communication apparatus of the second embodiment, and therefore, descriptions will be made by focusing only on operations which differ from those of the data communication apparatus discussed in the second embodiment with reference to the flow chart of Fig. 3.

Firstly, when activating the inquiry executing section 6, a flag is set to zero (0) in the inquiry executing section 6 (a), then a keyword for search is

entered by the user (b).

Then, a search result maximum value (Y) is entered by the user (b"). The search result maximum value (Y) is notified to the search result receiving section 8 from the inquiry executing section 6.

Then, the inquiry executing section 6 reads out PC information about a specified X number of PCs sequentially from the head of the connected PC list (c), and multicasts an inquiry to the specified X number of readout PCs (d).

Then, the inquiry executing section 6 examines if the connected PC list is read out through or not, or if the value of the flag is 1 or not (e). If the answer is yes to the step (e), then the operation is terminated (f). If the answer is no, then the operation proceeds back to repeat the operation in step (c). In the meantime, the inquiry executing section 6 waits for the notification of the termination of the search operation in an interruption wait routine (g). Upon reception of the notification, the inquiry executing section 6 sets the flag to 1 (h).

On the other hand, the search result receiving section 8 on PC#1 sets a primary variable T to zero (0) at the activation (i), waits for a search result from another PC (j). The search result receiving section 8, upon reception of a search result, provides the search result to the user (k), and adds 1 to the value of the primary

variable T (1).

Then, the search result receiving section 8 examines whether or not the value of the primary variable T exceeds the specified Y number which is entered in step (b") (m).

5 If the answer is yes to the step (m), then the search result receiving section 8 interrupts to notify the inquiry executing section 6 of the termination of the search operation (n), and then terminates the operation (o). If the answer is no, then the operation proceeds back
10 to repeat the operation in step (j).

It is a positive effect of the data communication apparatus of this embodiment that an amount of communication on the network may be controlled and the waiting time for search may be shortened by terminating
15 the series of operations for transmitting an inquiry and receiving a search result upon reception of the specified number of search results.

Embodiment 4.

20 A fourth embodiment of the present invention introduces a data communication apparatus in which the waiting time for search may be shortened further than the waiting time discussed in the third embodiment.

Fig. 4 shows a system configuration of the data
25 communication apparatus according to the fourth embodiment.

Referring to the figure, the reference numerals 1 to 12 and 30 denote the same elements as those having the same reference numerals discussed in the second embodiment. A reference numeral 13 denotes a connected time measuring section for measuring a communicating time with another PC. The connected time measuring section 13 functions as a transmission order setting section.

An operation of the data communication apparatus of this embodiment is now discussed.

The basic operation of the data communication apparatus of this embodiment is the same as that discussed in the second embodiment, and therefore, descriptions will be made by focusing only on operations which differ from those of the data communication apparatus discussed in the second embodiment.

At user-specified time intervals asynchronously with the primary operation, the connected time measuring section 13 on PC#1 reads out the connected PC list held in PC#1 of the self (a), and transmits a connection confirmation request (test data) to each of the connected PCs separately in a list order (b).

The connected time measuring section 13 on another PC returns a response of confirmation spontaneously to the PC of transmitting the connection confirmation request upon reception of the connection confirmation request. The

connected time measuring section 13 on PC#1, upon
reception of the response, holds a communicating time
between the transmission of the request and the reception
of the response, and then transmits the connection
5 confirmation request to the next PC in the list. The
series of operations are repeated through all the PCs in
the connected PC list 12. Then, the connected time
measuring section 13 sorts the PCs in the connected PCs
list 12 according to the communication time and re-arrange
10 the order of PCs from shortest to longest, and stores the
re-arranged list of connected PCs (d).

It is a positive effect of the data communication
apparatus of this embodiment that the search time and the
file transmitting/receiving time are allowed to be shorten
15 particularly in a wide area network in which the network
line condition is uncertain, by performing the sequential
inquiry operation similar to that discussed in the third
embodiment based on the connected PCs list sorted in the
order of PCs having a shorter time for communication, and
20 in other words, in the order of PCs having a less
congested communication line.

Embodiment 5.

According to the data communication apparatus
25 discussed in the first embodiment, the index is generated

by the user instructing so. A fifth embodiment of the present invention introduces a data communication apparatus which examines regularly whether or not the files are updated or added. Based upon the detection of a
5 file being updated or added, the index is re-generated.

Fig. 5 is a flow chart illustrating an operation of the data communication apparatus of this embodiment.

The flow chart of Fig. 5 illustrates a series of internal operations of the index generating section 5.

10 An operation of the data communication apparatus of the fifth embodiment is now discussed.

Initially, the index generating section 5, when activated, reads out a previous index generating time 40 stored (a), and then reads out sequentially a file
15 generating/updating time for each shared file in a directory storing shared files (b).

Then, it is examined that the file generating/updating time is after the previous index generating time 40 or not (c). If the answer is yes to the
20 step (c), then the index generating section 5 generates an index, stores a generated index in the index file 4 (d), and also stores the index generating time (e). Then, the index generating section 5 stops the operation during a specified interval T (f), and resumes the operation by
25 proceeding back to step (a) after the specified interval T.

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If the answer is no to step (c), then the index generating section 5 reads out next file generating/updating time (b).

It is a positive effect of the data communication apparatus of this embodiment index that the number of generating indexes may be reduced, thereby decreasing the load on the PC for generating indexes by examining the file generating/updating time for each shared file to generate an.

10 Embodiment 6.

With reference to the first to third embodiments, a PC always makes an inquiry to another PC. A sixth embodiment of the present invention introduces a data communication apparatus which uses a past log to omit making the inquiry to another PC.

Fig. 6 is a flow chart illustrating an operation of the data communication apparatus of this embodiment.

The flow chart of Fig. 6 modifies the flow chart of Fig. 3 for the third embodiment by adding some alterations.

20 An operation of the data communication apparatus of this embodiment is now discussed.

The basic operation of the data communication apparatus of this embodiment is same as that of the data communication apparatus discussed in the third embodiment, and therefore, descriptions will be made by focusing only

on operations which differ from those of the data communication apparatus discussed in the third embodiment.

The inquiry executing section 6, when activated, performs a pre-processing (a), receives a keyword entered by the user (b), reads out a search log stored in a search log storing section 60, and searches this search log based on the keyword (p). It is to be noted that the search log here is the history information of search requests. The search log stores a keyword, a search result in response to an inquiry request, the address of another PC from which the PC of the self received the search result, and so on for each inquiry request made previously in such a manner as to establish a correspondence among those. For that reason, the search log storing section 60 functions as a search request history information storing section.

Next, the inquiry executing section 6 compares an entered keyword with the keyword of each search log to examine whether or not those keywords match (q). If the answer is yes to the step (q), and in other words, the keywords match, then the inquiry executing section 6 obtains a search result from a corresponding search log and then informs the search result receiving section 8 of the search result obtained (s), which terminates the operation (f). If the answer is no, then the inquiry executing section 6 performs the normal operation for

making an inquiry in the same manner as that discussed in the third embodiment (r), and stores the keyword for search in the search log storing section (t), which terminates the operation (f).

5 On the other hand, the search result receiving section 8 performs mostly in the same manner as those discussed in the third embodiment with an additional operation below. Upon reception of the notification of a past search result from the inquiry executing section 6,
10 the search result receiving section 8 provides with the past search result to the user. Upon reception of no notification of a past search result from inquiry executing section 6, the search result receiving section 8 provides with a search result transmitted from another PC
15 to the user (k). Thereafter, the search result receiving section 8 writes these search results to the search log storing section 60 (u).

 In this manner, the inquiry executing section 6 notifies the search result receiving section 8 of the past
20 search result without transmitting an inquiry request to other PCs, if any log matches in a search operation of the search log. In other words, the search result receiving section 8 can obtain the search result from the inquiry executing section 6 without receiving a search result from
25 another PC.

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It is a positive effect of the data communication apparatus of this embodiment that the search time is allowed to be saved and the load for search on each of the other PCs may be decreased, in the case of frequently performing similar search operations, by performing a search operation based on the past search log.

Embodiment 7.

With reference to the second embodiment, it is required to have the connected PC list prior to operation for sharing information with other PCs. A seventh embodiment of the present invention introduces a data communication apparatus in which the connected PC list is dynamically generated/updated.

Fig. 7 shows a system configuration of the data communication apparatus according to the seventh embodiment of the present invention.

Referring to the figure, reference numerals 1 to 13 and 30 denote the same elements as those having the same reference numerals discussed in the previous embodiments.

A reference numeral 14 denotes a new entrance requesting section for issuing a new entrance request when starting to share information. A reference numeral 15 denotes a connected PC list generating section for generating a connected PC list based on information on

5 the new entrance request from the new member PC. A
reference numeral 17 denotes a new entrance allowing
section for transmitting information of the self PC in
response to the new entrance request from a new member PC.
The new entrance requesting section 14 and the new
10 entrance allowing section 17 each function as an
identification information communicating section.

15 files and the PCs #2 to #n are allowing PCs which allow
the entrance of PC#1.

20 information of the self PC to the other PCs #2 to #n (a).

25 identification information of the entering PC#1 to the

connected PC list updating section 16 (c). The connected PC list updating section 16 adds the identification information of the entering PC#1 to the connected PC list stored in the self PC (d).

5 On the other hand, the new entrance requesting section 14 on PC#1, upon reception of the identification information from the new entrance allowing section 17 of each of the other PCs #2 to #n, transfers the identification information received to the connected PC
10 list generating section 15. The connected PC list generating section 15 generates a connected PC list 12 based on the identification information of each of the other PCs (e).

 It is a positive effect of the data communication
15 apparatus of this embodiment that the user is not needed to decide which PCs share information with each other by generating/updating dynamically the connected PC list for sharing information with one another among PCs

20 Embodiment 8.

 With reference to the second embodiment, a single list is provided as the connected PC list. An eighth embodiment of the present invention introduces a data communication apparatus which is provided with a plurality
25 of connected PC lists.

Fig. 8 is a flow chart illustrating an operation of the data communication apparatus of this embodiment.

Referring to the flow chart, the basic flow of operation of the inquiry executing section 6 is the same as that discussed in the previous embodiments.

An operation of the data communication apparatus of this embodiment is now discussed.

First, the inquiry executing section 6, when activated, performs pre-processing (a). Then, the inquiry executing section 6 receives a keyword for search from the user (b). Next, the inquiry executing section 6 receives from the user an identifier identifying one of the plurality of connected PC lists (s). Then, the inquiry executing section 6 reads out PCs from a corresponding connected PC list to a received identifier M (c). Subsequently, the inquiry executing section 6 performs the same series of operations for inquiry as those discussed in the previous embodiments (r), which terminates the whole course of operations (f).

It is a positive effect of the data communication apparatus of this embodiment thus having a plurality of connected PC lists for sharing information that information may be shared efficiently by classifying PCs in different lists by the type of information to be shared, for example.

Embodiment 9.

With reference to the seventh embodiment, a new member PC issuing the new entrance request is allowed to share information without any restriction from other PCs. A ninth embodiment of the present invention introduces a data communication apparatus in which the new entrance is allowed by a judgement by the user.

Fig. 9 is a flow chart illustrating an operation of the data communication apparatus of this embodiment.

An operation of the data communication apparatus of this embodiment is now discussed.

First, the new entrance allowing section 17, when activated, goes into a wait state for a new entrance request from a new PC (a). Upon reception of a new entrance request, the new entrance allowing section 17 provides the user with information on the new member PC and makes an inquiry whether or not the new entrance is allowed (b). Then, the new entrance allowing section 17 examines whether or not the new entrance is allowed by the user (c). When the answer is yes to the step (c), then the new entrance allowing section 17 notifies the connected PC list updating section 16 of the identification information on the new member PC (d), transmits the identification information of the self PC to the new member PC in

response (e), and which terminates a whole course of operations (f). When the answer is no to the step (c), then the new entrance allowing section 17 notifies the new member PC of a rejected result of the new entrance in response (not shown in the flow chart).

It is a positive effect of the data communication apparatus of this embodiment that the number of PCs for sharing information may be controlled appropriately by allowing the user to decide whether or not to share information with another PC.

Embodiment 10.

With reference to the eighth embodiment, the PCs which information is to be shared with are divided into groups by identifier but the shared files are stored in a single group. A tenth embodiment of the present invention introduces a data communication apparatus in which the shared files are also divided into two or more groups.

Fig. 10 shows a system configuration of the tenth embodiment.

According to this embodiment, each PC 2 is provided with a plurality of connected PC lists 12, a plurality of index files 4, and a plurality of groups of shared files 30. Referring to Fig. 10, PC#1 appears to be provided with only the connected PC lists 12 in a multiple manner,

whereas PC#2 appears to be provided with only the index files 4 and the groups of shared files 30 in a multiple manner, which is for the sake of structural convenience of the figure. In fact, each PC 2 is provided with two or more connected PC lists 12, two or more index files 4 and two or more groups of shared files 30, and thus all in a plurality form.

The plurality of connected PC lists 12 is provided with identifiers being set to the individual connected PC lists 12. The plurality of index files 4 and the plurality of groups of shared files 30 are respectively provided with identifiers corresponding to those being set for the plurality of connected PC lists 12.

Besides, it is to be noted that the network 1 is omitted from Fig. 10 for the sake of structural convenience of the figure but, in fact, the PCs 2 are connected with each other over the network 1.

An operation of the data communication apparatus of this embodiment is now discussed.

In compliance with the operational flow of the inquiry executing section discussed in the eighth embodiment, the inquiry executing section 6 reads out one of the connected PC lists 12 having an identifier specified by the user (a), and makes an inquiry to PC#2 and/or other PCs based on the readout connected PC list 12

(b). It is to be noted that the inquiry request to be transmitted to PC#2 and/or other PCs includes an identifier specified by the user.

Then, the search executing section 7, on the PC upon
5 reception of the inquiry request, searches the index file 4 corresponding to the identifier included in the inquiry request (c), and transmits a search result in response (d).

Subsequently, on PC#1, upon reception of the search result from the one or more of the PCs, the file
10 transmission requesting section 9 issues a file transmission request of a file specified by the user (e). It is to be noted that the file transmission request also includes an identifier corresponding to the identifier of a connected PC list specified by the user.

15 Then, the file transmitting section 10 on PC#2 and/or other PCs, upon reception of the file transmission request, reads out a shared file corresponding to the identifier included in the file transmission request (f), and transmits the readout shared file (g).

20 The file receiving section 11 on PC#1, upon reception of the shared file from another PC, stores the file received in the disk(g).

It is a positive effect of the data communication apparatus of this embodiment that a search performance may
25 be improved by dividing the shared files and the indexes

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into groups according to the type of shared information.

Embodiment 11.

An eleventh embodiment of the present invention
5 introduces a data communication apparatus in which a file
obtained as a result of a search operation is updated
automatically.

Fig. 11 shows a system configuration of the eleventh
embodiment.

10 Reference numerals 1 to 12 and 30 denote the same
elements as those having the same reference numerals
discussed in the previous embodiments.

A reference numeral 18 denotes an update inquiry
executing section (update confirmation requesting section)
15 which issues an update confirmation request for requesting
another PC to confirm whether or not a previously obtained
file has been updated, and transmits the update
confirmation request issued to the PC.

A reference numeral 19 denotes an update confirming
20 section which receives the update confirmation request
transmitted from another PC, confirms the updating time of
a file in the self PC, and responds to the another PC
about the file being updated or not.

A reference numeral 50 denotes a reception log.

25 The network 1 is not shown in Fig. 11 for the

structural convenience of the figure. In fact, however, the PCs 2 are connected with one another over the network 1.

An operation of the data communication apparatus of this embodiment is now discussed.

The inquiry executing section 6 on PC#1 reads out the connected PC list 12 based on a keyword entered by the user (b), and broadcasts an inquiry request to other PCs (c). The search executing section 7 on another PC, upon reception of the inquiry request from PC#1, searches the index file 4 in the self PC (d), and returns a search result (e).

The search result receiving section 8 on PC#1, upon reception of the search result, provides the user with the search result.

The file transmission requesting section 9 on PC#1 issues a file transmission request of a file specified by the user (f). The file transmitting section 10 on another PC, upon reception of the file transmission request from PC#1, reads out the file from the disk 3 (g), and transmits the file to PC#1 (h).

The file receiving section 11 on PC#1, upon reception of the file transmitted, stores the file in the disk 3 of the self PC (i), and also stores the name of the file received, information about the PC from which the

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file is transmitted, and the receiving time of the file into the reception log 50.

On the other hand, the update inquiry executing section 18 on PC#1 reads out the reception log 50 (k),
5 provides the user with a list of files, and writes back file information on a file which is specified to be updated automatically by the user in the reception log 50 (l).

Besides, as a periodically performed operation, the
10 update inquiry executing section 18 reads out regularly file information on the file specified to be updated automatically from the reception log 50 (m), and makes an inquiry to the PC from which the file is obtained whether or not the file has been updated since the file is
15 obtained (n). The update confirming section 19 on another PC, upon reception of the inquiry, reads out the updating time of the file inquired (o), and responds to the update inquiry executing section 18 on PC#1 that the file has been updated or not (p).

20 The update inquiry executing section 18 on PC#1, upon reception of the response, in the case that the file has been updated, notifies the file transmission requesting section 9 to issue a file transmission request of the file (q). The file transmission requesting section
25 9 then issues the file transmission request to the PC

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responding that the file has been updated (f).

Subsequent operations will be performed in the same manner as the normal operations for inquiry discussed in the previous embodiments.

5 It is a positive effect of the data communication apparatus of this embodiment that shared information is allowed to be kept updated by the operation of updating an obtained file automatically.

10 Embodiment 12.

A twelfth embodiment of the present invention introduces a data communication apparatus in which the connected PC list are updated by analyzing a past reception log.

15 Fig. 12 shows a system configuration of the twelfth embodiment.

Reference numerals 1 to 12, 30 and 50 denotes the same elements as those having the same reference numerals discussed in the previous embodiments. A reference numeral
20 20 denotes a history management section for analyzing the past reception log to update the connected PC list. The history management section 20 functions as a data reception number counting section.

 An operation of the data communication apparatus of
25 this twelfth embodiment is now discussed.

The normal inquiry operations are performed in the same manner as those discussed in the eleventh embodiment.

On the other hand, the history management section 20 is activated regularly. The history management section 20
5 reads out the reception log 50 (k), and counts the number of receiving files for each PC as the file transmitting PC.

Then, the history management section 20 reads out the connected PC list 12 (l), and re-arranges PC
information in the connected PC list according to the
10 counted number of receiving files from most to least, and stores the connected PC list re-arranged (m).

It is a positive effect of the data communication apparatus of this embodiment that the search result may be more likely obtained earlier in response to the search
15 inquiry by analyzing the reception log and re-arranging PC information in the connected PC list according to the number of receiving files from most to least.

Embodiment 13.

20 A thirteenth embodiment of the present invention introduces a data communication apparatus in which a file obtained as a result of a search operation from another PC is added to a group of shared files 30.

Fig. 13 shows a system configuration of the
25 thirteenth embodiment.

The elements of the figure are the same as those having the same reference numerals discussed in the previous embodiments.

An operation of the data communication apparatus of this embodiment is now discussed.

A series of operations from executing an inquiry by the inquiry executing section 6 (c) to receiving a file by the file receiving section 11 (h) are same as those discussed in the first embodiment. Then, the file receiving section 11, upon reception of a file, adds the file received to a group of shared files 30 (i).

The index generating section 5 examines regularly whether or not the files are generated/updated to regenerate the index file 4 in the same manner as that discussed in the fifth embodiment.

It is a positive effect of the data communication apparatus of this embodiment that by adding a searched file to a group of shared files in the self PC, highly accessible information is allowed to be stored in more PCs, thereby improving a search efficiency.

Alternatively, although the previous descriptions were directed to the data communication apparatus (personal computer) of the present invention. A data communication method of the present invention may be implemented through the same procedures discussed above.

Furthermore, although the personal computer has been discussed as an example of the data communication apparatus of the present invention, the data communication apparatus of the present invention may not be limited to the personal computer alone. The data communication apparatus of the present invention may be applicable to any apparatus or device that allows a file to be shared among one or more apparatuses or devices.

The following is a summary of the characteristics of the present invention discussed above.

The inter-computer information sharing system of the present invention, in a group of personal computers (referred to hereinafter as "PC") which are connected with each other over the network and respectively hold files to be shared with a plurality of PCs, may be characterized with including the index generating section, the inquiry executing section, the search executing section, the search request receiving section, the file transmission requesting section, the file transmitting section and the file receiving section. The index generating section, generates regularly the index of the files to be shared. The inquiry executing section makes a search inquiry to all the other PCs in the group by broadcasting based on a keyword in a search request from the user. The search executing section searches the index in the self PC in

response to an inquiry from another PC and returns a search result. The search result receiving section receives the search result from another PC and provides the user with the search result. The file transmission requesting section requests to transmit a file specified by the user based on the provided search result. The file transmitting section transmits a corresponding file in response to the file transmission request from another PC. The file receiving section receives a file transmitted.

Furthermore, the inter-computer information sharing system of the present invention may be characterized with including the connected PC list which lists information such as the addresses of PCs which information is shared with. Besides, the inter-computer information sharing system may be characterized further with the inquiry executing section making the search inquiry to other PCs by referring to the connected PC list in such a manner as to make the search inquiry only to the addresses listed in the connected PC list.

Still further, the inter-computer information sharing system of the present invention may be characterized with including the inquiry executing section which makes a search inquiry not by broadcasting but by making the search inquiry in a sequential manner to a predetermined number of the other PCs at a time. In

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addition to that, the inter-computer information sharing system of the present invention may be characterized further with having the search result receiving section which notifies the inquiry executing section, upon
5 reception of the predetermined number of search results, that the operation for making an inquiry is to be stopped.

Still further, the inter-computer information sharing system of the present invention may be characterized with including the connected time measuring
10 section which transmits the confirmation inquiry of an operation to other PCs based on addresses listed in the connected PC list, measures the time between the transmission of the confirmation inquiry and the reception of a response, and re-arranges information such as
15 addresses listed in the connected PC list based on the measured result.

Still further, the inter-computer information sharing system of the present invention may be characterized with including the index generating section
20 which examines regularly a directory having a group of shared files stored, and re-generates the index in the case of detecting a file generated later than the preciously examined time in the directory.

Still further, the inter-computer information
25 sharing system of the present invention may be

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characterized with including the inquiry executing section which stores a search inquiry requested by the user and a search result from another PC as the search log, searches the search log first based on a new search request from the user, and when detecting a corresponding search result in the search log, then makes no inquiry to other PCs.

Still further, the inter-computer information sharing system of the present invention may be characterized with including the new entrance requesting section which broadcasts a notice to the respective PCs connected over the network that the PC joins to share information. In addition to that, the inter-computer information sharing system may be characterized with further including the connected PC list updating section which adds information such as the address of the PC of requesting new entrance in the connected PC list when receiving the new entrance request for sharing information. Still in addition to that, the inter-computer information sharing system may be characterized with further including the new entrance allowing section which transmits the notification that the new entrance for sharing information is accepted and information such as the address of the PC of its own to the PC of requesting new entrance. Still in addition to that, the inter-computer information sharing system may be characterized with further including the

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connected PC list generating section which receives the notification that the new entrance for sharing information is accepted and so forth and generates the connected PC list for the self PC.

5 Still further, the inter-computer information sharing system of the present invention may be characterized with including the inquiry executing section which controls a plurality of connected PC lists by adding identification information to each of the connected PC
10 lists, and requests the user to provide with information specifying one of the connected PC lists when making a search request to other PCs based on a request from the user.

 Still further, the inter-computer information
15 sharing system of the present invention may be characterized with including the connected PC list updating section which adds information such as the address of the PC of a requesting end to the connected PC list after making an inquiry to the user whether or not
20 the user allows to add the address to the connected PC list.

 Still further, the inter-computer information sharing system of the present invention may be characterized with including a plurality of groups of
25 shared files corresponding, respectively, to the plurality

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of the connected PC lists, in which each of the plurality of groups of shared files is allowed to be provided with corresponding index.

Still further, the inter-computer information sharing system of the present invention may be characterized with including the update inquiry executing section which receives a file transmitted in response to a request by the file transmission requesting section, stores information such as the receiving time of the file and the address of the file transmitting PC, the keyword used for inquiry, the name of the file received and so forth in the reception log, and makes an inquiry regularly to the file transmitting PC of a file specified by the user about whether or not the specified file has been updated. In addition to that, the inter-computer information sharing system of the present invention may be characterized with further including the update confirming section which confirms whether or not the file is updated in response to the update inquiry and responds to the PC of making the inquiry. Still in addition to that, the inter-computer information sharing system of the present invention may be characterized with further including the file transmission requesting section which requests the transmission of the file upon reception of the response confirming that the specified file is updated.

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Still further, the inter-computer information sharing system of the present invention may be characterized with including the file receiving section which receives a file transmitted as a result of a search operation in response to a search inquiry, and stores the information on the file transmitting PC as the reception log. In addition to that, the inter-computer information sharing system of the present invention may be characterized with further including the history management section which analyzes the reception log, and re-arranges PCs listed in the connected PC list according to the number of receiving files from most to least.

Still further, the inter-computer information sharing system of the present invention may be characterized with storing a received file into a directory having a group of shared files stored.

The invention being thus described, it will be obvious that the same may be varied in many ways. Such variations are not to be regarded as a departure from the spirit and scope of the invention, and all such modifications as would be obvious to one skilled in the art are intended to be included within the scope of the following claims.